

## **Fairbury's Shrewdest Land Speculator**

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The Beach family played an essential role in early Fairbury history. Their story began with the birth of Lorenzo Beach in 1798 in New Haven, Vermont. Lorenzo was the son of Obil Beach (1758-1846) and Elizabeth Kilbourne (1765-1829).

In 1813, when Lorenzo Beach was 15 years old, he moved to Ohio and joined his brother, Uri Beach, who had come to Worthington, Ohio, one year earlier. Lorenzo attended local schools. In 1816, Lorenzo started to study medicine in Worthington. He then went to Urbana, Ohio, and attended medical classes taught by Doctor Carter and Doctor Musgrove. Lorenzo was in a class of ten students and received a certificate for completing his medical education. Lorenzo made a friend in medical school, James Comstock.

Around 1818, Dr. Lorenzo Beach and Dr. James Comstock began their medical practices in Amity, Ohio. In that era, medical doctors traveled by horse and buggy to see their patients from a 30-mile radius of where the doctor lived. In 1824, Dr. Lorenzo Beach married Miss Edith Bull. He was 26, and she was 22 when they married. They had five children.

In about 1833, Dr. Beach decided he did not make enough money as a doctor, so he switched his career to investing in farmland and trading livestock. He became the largest landowner and largest trader of livestock in Darby Township in Ohio.

In 1850, Congress passed one of several Script Acts, which gave free land to veterans of past wars, including the War of 1812, the Mexican War, and the Indian Wars. The majority of the veterans were from the War of 1812. These War of 1812 veterans were over 55 years of age and living on the East Coast when the 1850 Script Act was passed. They had no desire to move to the swampy lands in Central Illinois, so they sold their military land patent rights to speculators and farmers who did want the land. In the 1850s, the official price to purchase land in Illinois from the federal government was \$2.50 per acre. Veterans sold their military land patents for about 10 cents on the dollar to the official government price.

Very few settlers came to the Fairbury area between 1830 and 1853 because the land was swampy, and there needed to be railroads to bring supplies and take out grain. It took a few years for the 1850 Script Act to be implemented. The result was a land rush to the Fairbury area. Instead of paying the official government price of \$2.50 per acre, settlers could buy military land patents from veterans for about 30 cents an acre. Between 1853 and 1860, all of the land in the Fairbury area was claimed. Much of this land was purchased using military veteran land patents.

In 1853, Ohio land prices increased to about \$35 per acre, and Dr. Beach started selling all of his Ohio land holdings at this price range. According to the 1936 book *The Ancestry and Posterity of Obil Beach* by Fairbury historian Alma Lewis James, Dr. Beach discovered that he could buy Central Illinois farmland at only 30 cents an acre if he bought military veteran land patents. He could also pay only \$2.50 per acre cash to purchase land.

Although several historical sources state that military veterans sold their land patent rights for about ten cents on the dollar, this 1936 book documents that Dr. Lorenzo Beach paid 30 cents an acre to buy these rights. The price of 30 cents an acre equals paying 12 cents on the dollar of the official federal land price of \$2.50 an acre.

The U.S. Department of the Interior Bureau of Land Management maintains a website that records who initially bought land from the federal government. The information in this database indicates that Dr. Lorenzo Beach made 38 different land purchases. Between 1854 and 1867, he purchased 5,773 acres in Livingston, McLean, and Kankakee counties.

Dr. Beach purchased 3,210 acres in McLean County, 1,083 acres in Livingston County, and 1,480 acres in Kankakee County. Dr. Lorenzo Beach used military veteran land patents to buy 720 of the 5,773 acres he purchased, and he paid cash for the rest of the acres.

In 1869, Edith Beach died at the age of 67 in Fairbury. Dr. Lorenzo Beach was 70 when his wife died. Two years later, in 1871, Dr. Lorenzo Beach married Sarah A. Roop. Lorenzo Beach was 73, and Sarah was 77 when they married.

Dr. Lorenzo Beach died at the age of 81 in 1878 in Fairbury. A structural disease of the heart caused his death. He was buried in Graceland Cemetery.

In the decade after Dr. Lorenzo Beach died, all of the farmland in the Fairbury area was permanently drained using the new invention of clay field tile. Draining the land using field tile converted Fairbury farmland from swampland to some of the most productive lands on the planet. The value of cropland went up tenfold after tiling because so many good crops could be raised yearly.

In today's dollars, the 5,773 acres Dr. Lorenzo Beach purchased in the 1850s would be worth \$115 million at a current market price of \$20,000 per acre.

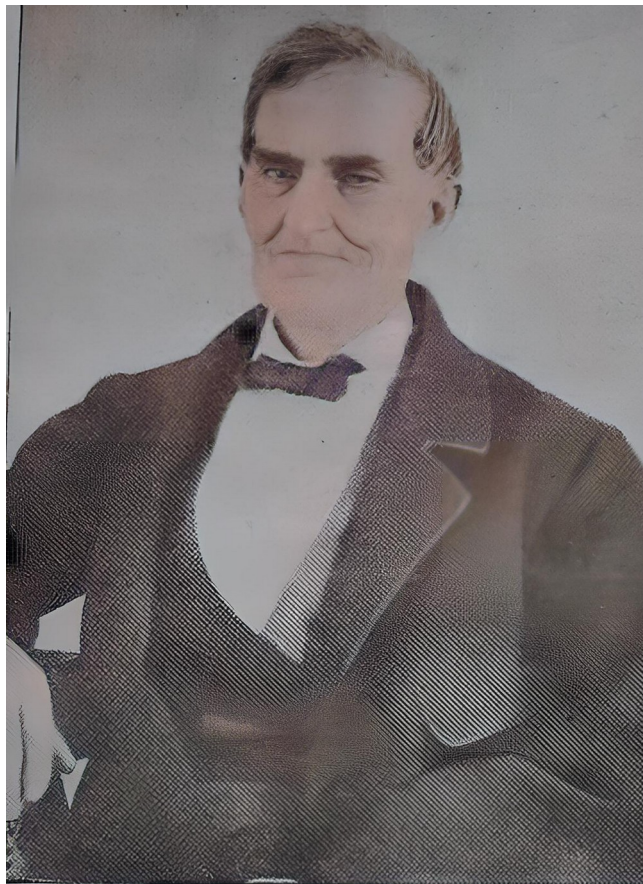
The descendants of Dr. Lorenzo Beach played essential roles in early Fairbury history. Thomas A. Beach (1828-1911), son of Dr. Lorenzo Beach, became a businessman and banker worth over \$50 million in today's dollars when he died in 1911. He built the Beach House in 1872 at 402 E. Hickory Street. This home is on the National Register of Historic Places. The Beach family also built their family mausoleum at Graceland Cemetery.

Lorenzo Beach Dominy (1844-1902), grandson of Dr. Lorenzo Beach, was the first mayor of Fairbury. He started the Dominy Memorial Library in memory of his daughter, Hazel Dominy, who died when she was just 17 years old.

Dr. George C. Lewis (1856-1932) married Ella Beach (1862-1939), granddaughter of Dr. Lorenzo Beach. Dr. Lewis delivered over 1,000 Fairbury babies during his 28-year medical practice. Dr. Lewis and his wife, Ella, were philanthropists who donated the land the Prairie-Central High School now stands on. The athletic field at the high school was named Lewis Field in memory of Dr. Lewis and his wife.

Alma Lewis James was the great-granddaughter of Dr. Lorenzo Beach. Alma became a Fairbury historian and wrote the book *Stuffed Clubs & Antimacassars*, which documents Fairbury's history from 1857 until 1900.

Dr. Lorenzo Beach was Fairbury's shrewdest land speculator. He recognized he could sell his Ohio farmland at relatively high prices and then buy Fairbury area farmland at relatively low prices. The Fairbury farmland he purchased in the 1850s is now worth millions of dollars.



DR. LORENZO BEACH